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A Tentative Tool for Making Morally Better Decisions in Business - a Rossian Approach

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The aim of this article is to describe the main idea of William Ross's theory morality. Based on this a tentative tool for the moral decision-making in business is made.

In 1930 William David Ross put forth the book "Right and Good" in which he tried to combine some elements of teleological theories with Kantian deontological ethics.

Although Ross rejected the (teleological) idea that the consequences of some acts are the only one remarkable criteria, when one evaluates the moral worth of that act, Ross never agreed with Kant that only one moral law can be formed as a basis for our action.

This means that Ross wants to take account both the motive and the consequences of the act. Thus, his idea is an intermediate form between deontological and teleological theories.

Ross thought that "right" is basic term:

"... Our duty, then is not to do certain things which will produce certain results. Our acts at any rate our acts of special obligation, are not right because they will produce certain results. - which is the view common to all forms of utilitarianism. To say that is to say ... An act is not right because it, being one thing, produces good results different from itself. It is right because it is itself the production of a certain states of affair. Such production is right in itself, apart from any consequence."

Mainly, according to Ross, we can suppose that the moral worth of an act is depending on the motive of the act. That is, the good will is the most important thing in the moral evaluation. Duties of a man are the very essential thing in the moral discourse.

But, these duties could be in the conflicting position with each other. For example we could have a duty to keep a promise but in the same time we could have also a duty to protect somebody.

When we are doing our moral decisions it is essential to weigh moral chances against the other, and evaluate what duties are the most compelling. As Ross put it, our deeds can be subsumed under many normative bundles of rules.

E.g; a business manager could have a duty to maximize owner's profits and in the same time he/she has a duty to not to harm employees by dismissing them.

Ross concept of a prima facie duty is extremely important for business and professional ethics. It is difficult to talk about conflicts of duties or the obligations attaching on particular roles or offices without employing Ross's concept of prima facie duty. But the theory of prima facie duty is more impressive than the defense of it. His defense of his theory is little more than an appeal of intuition. He claims that the basic prima facies obligations are self evident.

Ross: "There is nothing arbitrary about this prima facie duty. Each rests on a definite circumstance which cannot seriously be held to be without moral significance. Of prima-facie duties I suggest, without claiming completeness of finality for it the following division".

But what are those prima facie duties?

They are as follows, according to Ross:

- Duties of fidelity.
- Duties of gratitude.
- Duties of justice.
- Duties of beneficence to others
- Duties of self-development.
- Duties not to injure others

Those duties are not absolute, but more contingent.

W D Ross differs from Kant by viewing duties as conditional rather than absolute. If two or more duties will conflict with each other we must obey that which is the most obligatory. For example your promise to help a friend move prior to discovering that you are scheduled to be out of town on business on that day. Prima facie duties are duties that must be honored unless they conflict with a stringer duty. In this case, they can be overridden by the more important duty.

We have to choose that duty which causes the largest possible amount of Prima facies rightness.

Nowadays we live in the world of multi values. How can a business manager apply Rossian thinking in his daily work?

Business manager lives in the reality with many conflicting pressures. The demands of the stakeholders are always present in the decision-making situations. This implies that THE CONTINGENCY is the name of the game.

First, the manager must build a table of duties and good things which he want to carry out in his work. Second, he must make the lists of preferences for his professional duties. Third, he needs to reflect the possible areas of conflicts considering the duties.

So he/she may has:

- list or map of the stakeholders of the business
- list of his/her actual professional duties
- list of prima duties by Ross

By doing a matrix (table) including these components, it may be possible to develop a tool for the business manager for making morally better decisions in managerial work. In the table formed (a new analytic tool) a manager can see a combination of moral and professional duties connected with each stakeholder.

The model presented here is tentative and needs to be developed further!

If someone is willing to co-operate concening the model (e.g. write to paper with me), please contact the author (tatakala@tase.jyu.fi).

Sources

Ross, D: Right and Good. London. 1972.

Ross, D: The Foundations of Ethics. Oxford. 1963.